



Photo Credit: Eat Sleep Play Beaufort

Photo Details: Mother daughter duo Cheryl Hunter and Allegra Craig own store Joli Home Accents in downtown Beaufort, a beautifully merchandised space that keeps local residents and tourists alike always engaged.

A CITY'S CHARM

Southern Stores and Southern Charm:
A Peak into the Beautiful Town of Beaufort, South Carolina

by Amy Knebel

Walking around Beaufort, South Carolina, it's easy to see why so many people visit and why major motion pictures have been filmed here. Movies such as *Forrest Gump*, *The Big Chill* and *The Prince of Tides* all show off the breathtaking beauty of this seaside town. Nestled in the South Carolina Lowcountry's coastal Sea Islands on the Intra-Coastal Waterway, Beaufort is truly paradise on Main Street. Retail Minded was lucky to spend a few days in Beaufort getting to know "The Queen of the Carolina Sea Islands."

A Long History of Main Street Commerce

Beaufort has a rich history dating back to 1711, when it was issued a charter from the British Empire. Behind Charleston, Beaufort is the second oldest city in South Carolina. For many years, Beaufort was another coastal economic center, and agriculture and shipbuilding were the mainstays of the economy. After the Civil War, phosphate mining was lucrative until a hurricane in 1893 wiped out the industry. Following that, World War II brought a military-industrial complex boom to augment the fishing industry. After the fishing industry declined and

around the time nearby Hilton Head Island became a tourist destination, Beaufort became a popular place to visit due to its natural beauty, antebellum architecture, picturesque main street and overall Southern charm. In fact, at over 300 acres, the central business district of Beaufort is noted as the largest historic district in South Carolina according to the National Register of Historic Places.

A Case of Confusion

Many people confuse Beaufort, SC (pronounced Beeewwfort) with Beaufort, NC (pronounced Bo-fort). Both are Atlantic coastal cities, with the North Carolina Beaufort lying about 370 miles north of the South Carolina Beaufort. If you're confused, you're not the only one. After leaving Hollywood, John Sharp bought a boat and set sail from Beaufort, NC. He ran into a terrible storm, was rescued by helicopter and delivered to the hospital in Beaufort, SC. When his rescuers told him where he was, he thought he was back where he had started! Once he discovered the beauty and charm of Beaufort, SC, he hasn't left since. We can see why. We didn't want to leave, either.

One of the best parts of the local retail community is that merchants are extremely respectful of each other. We try to avoid carrying the same product and that is fairly well respected. If we do have an overlap, we'll mark it down and let it go, rather than compete with a neighbor.



Downtown Beaufort Today

When you drive into downtown Beaufort and turn onto Bay Street, you find yourself at a crossroads in time. Evidence of a bygone era is everywhere, from the antebellum homes that ring the main street area to the seawall and buildings made from tabby, a building material made from crushed oyster shells, lime, sand and water. Beaufort was ahead of its time in using sustainable, natural, local materials for construction that has stood the test of time.

Bay Street's commercial area is approximately 4 blocks of stores, service businesses and restaurants running the length of the Henry C. Chambers waterfront park on the Beaufort River. Many of the original storefronts have been carefully maintained or refurbished under the guidance of the Beaufort Historical Review Board, so the atmosphere is classic and eclectic at the same time.

Keeping in nature with the genteel, palm tree-dotted waterfront surroundings is the general vibe of Beaufort. People are happy and genuinely warm. It's no accident; people love living here and it shows. Visitors will become easily spoiled from the friendly treatment; this reputation has put Beaufort on the media map. In August 2013, Beaufort was named "Happiest Seaside Town" by Coastal Living magazine. This award joins a host of similar accolades such as "Best Small Southern Town" by Southern Living, a "Top 25 Small City Arts Destination" by American Style, and a "Top 50 Adventure Town" by National Geographic Adventure.

Today's Tourists are Local Retail's Boon

Beaufort has no real large industry other than being located near Parris Island and Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort. These two military installations do contribute to the local economy, but the economy relies on tourism as its main driver. Many visitors to Beaufort come for the beautiful surroundings and sense of history, but most importantly, Beaufort has a reputation for celebration. Its many festivals draw huge crowds of tourists and locals alike and pump a lot of money into the seasonal economy. For example, the two week-long Water Festival, the Shrimp Festival and the Taste of Beaufort are among the festivals that draw visitors and locals.

Independent Retail Gets Real Support

Main Street Beaufort is the downtown non-profit that is taking point on promoting all things retail. Their progressive approach to promoting and advertising local retailers and the shop local movement complements their work to recruit and retain local independent retailers. Not only does Main Street Beaufort work on behalf of indies, they also are the organizing force behind Beaufort's many festivals. These combined efforts really drive business, both local and tourist, for retailers. The Shop Local Beaufort campaign is another example of the support retailers enjoy. Shop Local Beaufort educates local consumers on the impact of their dollars when spent locally while encouraging them to keep their shopping close to home.

Southern Hospitality At Its Finest

When Retail Minded set out to learn more about the independent retailers that are the backbone of Beaufort's downtown, we had no idea that we would get the star treatment, southern hospitality-style, and insider access to some of the best retailers on Bay Street.

Enter Gene Brancho, owner of Eat, Sleep, Play Beaufort, an independent website curating the best of Beaufort's current events, attractions, lodging, dining and most importantly, shopping. Brancho explained why Beaufort's independent retail scene is so vibrant.

"Beaufort is a unique place for its independent retailers for a number of reasons. Main Street Beaufort stages so many festivals that bring in visitors, the military graduations bring visitors, but it's really about the people who want to come no matter what. We're lucky that our downtown district has the support from a large segment of the local community, too. This plus our seasonal visitor influx provides excellent support for our independent retailers and a boon to lodging, restaurants and service-based businesses," explains Brancho.

A Walk Down Bay Street

Not only did Brancho spend time with Retail Minded to give us a detailed view of Beaufort's indie retail scene, he also introduced us to two of Beaufort's most progressive independent retailers, the team behind Jolie Home Accessories and the force behind Lulu Burgess, gift shop extraordinaire.

We visited Joli first, and it was love at first sight for Retail Minded. Artfully merchandised, there is something for every home somewhere within these four walls. Retail Minded chatted with mother-daughter duo Cheryl Hunter and Allegra Craig about what drew them to open a store in Beaufort and how they have grown and prospered over the years.

As a former interior designer, Hunter started in retail in Philadelphia, and relocated to Beaufort. His daughter came to Beaufort, as well, and Joli has been a local fixture for the past 7 years. Hunter shares her thoughts on their success.

"The most important thing is our customers, we know them by name. Tourists account for much of our traffic, but not for the bulk of the revenue. Locals have responded to the shop local movement and support us very well," Hunter explains.

Additionally, Hunter elaborated on working in Beaufort. "Working with my daughter in our store here in Beaufort in particular has been so much fun because we live in a beautiful area; its unique quirks make it that much more charming. It lifts your spirits being in such a gorgeous place. Everyone here is friendly and we have cheerful customers, so working with my daughter has been a happy surprise. We've met our goal to have unique things and as much product made in the South and in the USA as possible. Plus, we're always looking for something new when we go to market," Hunter shares.

Living in beautiful Beaufort certainly has its perks, but so does having great retail neighbors.

"One of the best parts of the local retail community is that merchants are extremely respectful of each other. We try to avoid carrying the same product and that is fairly well respected. We can do this because we now our neighbors and ask our reps to make sure no one else on Bay Street or in our zip code carries it. If we do have an overlap, we'll mark it down and let it go, rather than compete with a neighbor."

Hunter's daughter, Allegra Craig, appreciates this, as well as the lack of big box stores.

"Being an independent retailer in Beaufort is beneficial for so many reasons. The broad picture is that we have fewer big box stores to compete with, such as Pottery Barn and Anthropologie. Additionally, being in a smaller town allows us to get to know our customers really well – to

be on a first name basis with not only locals, but also tourists who visit year after year," explains Craig. Additionally, "We get local support, as well. Main Street Beaufort (MSB) does a fantastic job supporting our indie shops. MSB developed a Main Street Beaufort Dollars program a couple years ago. Once or twice a year – during what is typically a slow time for retail – Main Street Beaufort sells "dollars" for half price. Again, this encourages the locals to take advantage of the great shopping downtown. Because MSB sets aside money in their budget for this, merchants receive full compensation for items purchased with the special dollars," Craig tells us.

Having seen first-hand how town "dollars" can impact a local economy and local merchants, we were thrilled to hear Beaufort participates in this, as well. Additionally, the Eat Sleep Play Beaufort website has been a great help to many downtown merchants. Through their website and Facebook page, website owner Brancho brings attention to the various local businesses throughout Beaufort. He actively promotes them via giveaways and contests on Facebook, which he identified as having strengthened his company's name among the locals, as well.

"While Beaufort is definitely a tourist destination, we are fortunate enough to have a local population that supports small businesses year-round. In fact, fourth quarter continues to be our best because the locals shop with us during the season. While we have slower times of year, there is never a point where Beaufort completely shuts down, and that is thanks to our locals. Living in a small town helps, too. When locals have a great experience, they tell their friends. We continue to gain more local customers because of this," Craig tells Retail Minded.

Laughter and Luxe at Lulu Burgess

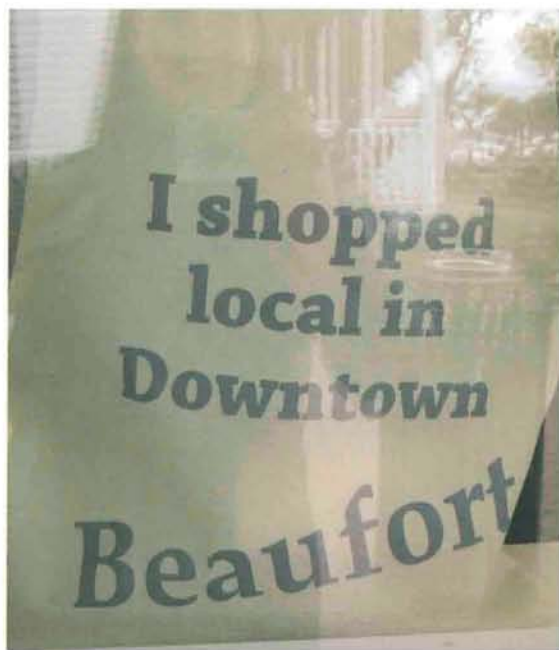
From one store to the next, Retail Minded also spent time at Lulu Burgess - "A Shop for the Truly Gifted" - as its tagline proclaims. Nan Brown Sutton has created an energetic zone of gifts for one and all. Sutton maintains that life is too short not to laugh, and her philosophy is apparent throughout the store and her attitude towards retailing in Beaufort.

"I've been here for 13 years and have always been gift themed. My inventory has grown over the years, however. Now I buy deeper on lines and have expanded my selections into accessories and clothing be-



A New Life for an Old Space

Many Main Streets have to deal with a retailer moving out and a storefront going vacant. In Beaufort's case, there was a particular storefront that was not only large, but prominently located on the corner of Bay and Carteret Streets in the heart of this southern town. Instead of leasing the space to a business, the building's owner thought outside the box. Formerly Fordham Hardware, Fordham Market is now an opportunity for local artists and smaller merchants to rent a space to sell their unique goods alongside each other under one roof without the exposure and overhead of leasing an individual store location. A retail space remains retail (instead of becoming something else) and local artists have a permanent space for customers to visit. Everybody wins, and we think that's pretty cool!



PHOTOS: RETAIL MINDED

cause I do get the support from locals and visitors alike. Lulu's is known for its humor, especially the guy corner, where there are a lot of funny, clever gifts. People can come in and find a nice gift and a card for someone else, or they can shop for themselves," Sutton tells Retail Minded.

"I'm dedicated to buying what customers like. For me it's 50% locals and 50% tourists. Knowing the locals and the tourists is a way to help inform my buying. I know what locals go for, but I also buy things I like and know will have a broader appeal. When I buy what I know I will like, I'm passionate about selling it. Our eclectic approach has an appeal for everyone."

Having an eclectic store certainly makes for a fun shopping experience, but Sutton knows there is more to retail than just that. "I'm a retailer who's in it to do stuff for everybody and with everybody. I promote a charity, our local children's shelter, as a part of my regular holiday sales and most retailers here are very generous with silent auction items for fundraisers. Additionally, I love social media. We post everyday on Facebook. We also do Filmtastic Friday videos on You-

tube. These are short videos to introduce new products and promote anything special. We also interview other store owners and showcase them so people have reasons to get downtown. People comment or will come in to specifically buy stuff from the videos. We can reach so many people through these efforts."

Being engaged in multiple avenues to reach your audience and support your community is a winning recipe in retail, and it Sutton's store is a great example of this.

As The Old Southern Saying Goes

"Pretty is as pretty does."

Translation... Some things look are enhanced by what it does or how it acts. In this case, it's easy to see that Beaufort's beauty is the perfect backdrop to a warm, engaging and successful independent retail scene. Retail Minded is lucky to have visited Beaufort and we hope to be repeat visitors, just like so many others who have fallen under the spell of this city full of Southern charm.

Small Town Social Media at Its Best

So many players in Beaufort's independent retail scene are using social media to their advantage. From Lu Lu Burgess' Filmtastic Fridays on Youtube to retailers' frequent and detailed Facebook updates, everyone is using clever social media strategies to keep local and visiting customers engaged.

Gene Brancho, founder of Eat Sleep Play Beaufort, wanted retailers to have multiple avenues for exposure to drive home the idea of shopping local. In addition to being able to showcase retailers on his website and using Twitter and Facebook to promote giveaways, Brancho has a number of other social media tricks up his sleeve. One of Retail Minded's favorites is a local retail scavenger hunt. Brancho posts a close-up photo

of an item at a local indie retailer on Facebook and Twitter and asks followers to identify the store. The winner receives a \$10 gift certificate to that store. It's fun, it's easy and it's competitive – a great, engaging combination of reasons to reach your audience. Plus, it drives business to a local retailer! Pretty nice, huh?

Whether you are the creative type or not, incorporating social media into your store strategy is a must. It is, after all, 2014 (no more excuses, social media is here to stay). Still stuck for words or ideas how to do this? Check out SnapRetail.com and BoutiqueWindow.com to help you in reaching your social media and other online marketing goals.